

REVIEW

**DORE J. LEVY, *READING ART IN LITERATURE: THE MARVELOUS CASE OF THE STORY OF THE STONE*.
AMHERST, NEW YORK: CAMBRIA PRESS, 2025.
346 PP. ISBN: 9781638571933.**

In *The Story of the Stone* 石頭記 (*Dream of the Red Chamber* 紅樓夢), Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹 (ca.1715–ca.1763) curated a dazzling array of exquisite things: ivory chopsticks inlaid with gold, teacups made of enameled porcelain, jade pendants of various shapes and colors, paintings and calligraphies alluding to iconic artists, and the grandest of them all—the Prospect Garden 大觀園. What does it mean to live in this gallery of artistic creations, where objects on display are not only nostalgic echoes for the glorious past, but also keys to character building and narrative strategies? How do we make sense of these objects, which are grounded in both historical reality and fictionality? Addressing these questions, Professor Dore J. Levy’s monograph, *Reading Art in Literature: The Marvelous Case of The Story of the Stone*, provides a map for an intellectual odyssey—a “delightful treasure hunt” (p. 62) that sometimes presents itself as a seemingly “inescapable labyrinth” (p. 62).

Offering a fresh perspective to the intricate field of Redology 紅學, *Reading Art in Literature* represents both a continuation of and a critical pivot from Levy’s earlier scholarship, most notably *Ideal and Actual in The Story of the Stone*.¹ Aiming to move the beloved classic into the “Western-focused mainstream” (p. 2), Levy argues that the field of visual culture is an appropriate methodology for analyzing the novel. Through this lens, Cao Xueqin’s meticulous descriptions of objects and environments do more than merely reflect everyday life in the Jia family. They cultivate a deep emotional attachment in the reader, a bond that ultimately renders the novel’s final lesson—the renunciation of all worldly illusion—more powerful.

In Levy’s studies, vignettism emerges as the fundamental structural principle underlying all sequential Chinese art forms, from narrative fiction and painting to garden design. Under

¹ Dore J. Levy, *Reading Art in Literature: The Marvelous Case of The Story of the Stone* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

this principle, a large-scale work is constructed from a series of discrete, self-contained lyrical moments or scenes (vignettes). While each vignette possesses its own momentary autonomy, they are integrated as a logical sequence through time and space to create a cohesive, extended work.² Based on this principle of vignettism, *Reading Art in Literature* is divided into two parts: Chapters 1–3 explore objects found in the Jia Mansions, while Chapters 4–5 delve into the Prospect Garden. Chapter 1, “Objects of Social Consequence,” explores how material possessions operate as instruments of social hierarchy and communication. It begins by examining the novel’s opening paradox of truth and fiction, asserting that the meticulously described realism of the Jia family’s possessions establishes the immersive illusion necessary for the narrative’s allegory of impermanence. Next, Levy defines “art” in the *Stone* in four categories: (1) objects of fine art, (2) objects of virtuoso craft, (3) luxury objects, such as foreign goods, and (4) ritual objects, referring to the ancestral portraits and the bronzes in the family temple. As signifiers of power and status, these objects are strategically displayed and circulated, which are clearly rendered in the episodes on Wang Xifeng’s 王熙鳳 glass screen, Grandmother Jia’s 賈母 stone basin landscape, and Miaoyu’s 妙玉 teacups. In addition, the characters’ comments on provenance, style, or artistry are shown to be tools for social competition and judgment.

Shifting focus from domestic artifacts to high art, Chapter 2 explores the imaginary masterpieces in the *Stone*. The chapter begins by highlighting a crucial moment of connoisseurship where the narrator instructs the reader to appreciate fictional artworks (such as Huiniang’s 慧娘 embroidery) as if they were genuine historical treasures, which leads to the central discussion on Cao Xueqin’s pseudo-historical creations: paintings and calligraphies that, while non-existent, are rendered perfectly plausible within the cultural and historical context, such as the pseudo and invented works of Mi Fu’s 米芾 (1051–1107) landscape and Yan Zhenqing’s 顏真卿 (709–785) calligraphy found in Tanchun’s 探春 studio. These pieces are crucial for character building, reflecting the owner’s temperament, fate, or moral standing, thus we have the austere simplicity of Baochai’s apartment and the sensual luxury of Qinshi’s 秦氏 chamber. This chapter concludes with a discussion on Tang Yin’s 唐寅 (1470–1524) deep influence, showing how allusions to his style—from “The Spring Slumber” in Qinshi’s

2 C.f. Dore J. Levy, “Vignettism in the Poetics of Chinese Narrative Painting,” in Alexandra Green ed. *Rethinking Visual Narratives from Asia: Intercultural and Comparative Perspective* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), pp. 27–40.

bedroom to the “dirty pictures” in Xue Pan’s 薛蟠 possession—are used to subtly foreshadow the themes of love, lust, and decay.

Chapter 3, “Mirrors and Jade,” begins with an analysis on *Fengyue baojian* 風月寶鑑 (Mirror for the Romantic). Through close reading, Levy compares this magic mirror with the making of Han-dynasty bronze *mojing* 魔鏡 (ghost mirrors) (p. 140) and the apotropaic mirrors discussed in Li Shizhen’s 李時珍 (1516–1593) *Bencao gangmu* 本草綱目 (*Compendium of Materia Medica*) (p. 142). “As an antidote to illusion,” Levy points out, “mirrors always reveal true forms.” (p. 143) However, the truth they reveal also serve as catalysts for delusion: while Jia Rui 賈瑞 looks into the wrong side of the mirror and invites his “personal demons” (p. 144), Daiyu’s 黛玉 dressing table mirror shows her illness, which she misinterprets as a sign of romance. The second part of the chapter shifts focus to the Stone 石頭 and the Jade 通靈寶玉, the sentient rock which turned into the inscribed jade found in Baoyu’s mouth when he was born. This pairing establishes Baoyu’s predetermined destiny of being a divine entity forced into mortal suffering, and the three avatars of the Stone (the rock left by Nüwa 女媧, the Jade, and Jia Baoyu) form the core of the narrative as one art object.

Chapter 4, “It’s Bigger on the Inside,” initiates Part 2 of the study by analyzing the Prospect Garden as the novel’s most significant work of integrated visual and literary art. The first section defines it as a microcosm of the lyrical cosmos, which can be compared with imperial parks and literati gardens. The second section explores the collaborative nature of Prospect Garden’s creation, focusing on design principles described in Ji Cheng’s 計成 (1582–1642) *Yuan ye* 園冶 (*The Craft of Gardens*). The garden is further analyzed as an anthology of literary topoi, where every detail serves as a deliberate cultural reference, allowing the landscape to embody layers of meaning with literary and political implications. In this section, Levy not only revisits some of the more familiar references in Redology, such as Sima Xianru’s 司馬相如 (179–117 BCE) *Shanglin fu* 上林賦 (*Rhapsody on Shanglin Park*) and Shi Chong’s 石崇 (249–300) *Jingu yuan* 金谷園 (Golden Valley Garden), but also draws our attention to Han Yu’s 韓愈 (768–824) lovely short poem “Penchi 盆池” (*The Pond in a Bowl*): a miniature that allows a person to feel closer to nature. The chapter concludes by examining the garden as individual experiences among the characters, contrasting Jia Zheng’s 賈政 rigid, official Confucian appraisal of the garden with Baoyu’s subjective, imaginative, and deeply emotional garden experience.

Chapter 5, “A Walk in the Park,” applies the core concept of vignettism to the structure of the narrative itself, showing how it is mirrored and embedded in the design of the Prospect

Garden. Levy first elaborates on the principle that the novel is structured as a sequence of discrete, self-contained lyrical tableaux (vignettes) that, when experienced chronologically, create a seamless, integrated whole. Then she explores the garden's deliberate contrasts—rough against polished, light against dark, nature against human artifice—demonstrating how this aesthetic balance reflects the novel's use of complementary opposites (ideal/actual, real/unreal). This aesthetic harmony is, however, inherently fragile, foreshadowing the garden's inevitable fall. The chapter concludes with an examination of guided garden tours, namely the visits by Jia Zheng, the Imperial Concubine Yuan Chun 元春, and Grannie Liu 劉姥姥. Levy makes a particularly interesting observation: while lacking cultural refinement, Grannie Liu intuitively makes a distinction between the *false* garden in her New Year picture and the *real* garden which she is enjoying. As such, “she is definitely experiencing the Garden *as if it were a landscape painting—only ten times better*” (italics in original, p. 266).

Aiming to bring *The Story of the Stone* to a broader audience, *Reading Art in Literature* succeeds by balancing scholarly depth with accessibility. The monograph is written in a manner that can be appreciated by serious Redologists as well as students who are not familiar with the novel. In addition, to illuminate the novel's intricate descriptions, the book features twenty-four full-color illustrations—a rarity in English-language scholarship on the *Stone*. These images, mostly photographs of paintings and artifacts sourced from major museums across Asia and the United States, are more than mere beautiful pictures. They serve as a vital bridge for readers unfamiliar with mid-Qing material culture, allowing them to visualize the historical reality that informs fiction. By grounding literature in visual arts, Levy ensures the novel and her analysis are not only read but also seen. In doing so, she fulfills her promise of bringing the *Stone* to the mainstream, through words and images.

I-Hsien Wu

吳逸仙

The City College of New York, CUNY